



Samantha Harvey's latest novel is a timely and essential meditation on the natural world.
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY

The grand scheme of things

Nathan Dunne

Orbital
By Samantha Harvey

Jonathan Cape, 193pp, £14.99

On the space station in Samantha Harvey's novel *Orbital*, there is a political crisis over who can use the bathrooms. While the astronauts and cosmonauts might share sleeping quarters, they refuse to pee together. Toilet doors have national plaques. Of the six people on-board, this segregation, which is orchestrated by governments on Earth, becomes a source of amusement. Shaun, an American, says "I'm going to take a national pee," while Roman announces, "Guys, I'm going to go and do one for Russia."

The scene offers comic relief for what is otherwise a sober meditation on climate catastrophe and existence.

Although the novel follows the course of a single day, because we are in space, time is elastic.

For the characters, mundane activities are essential for sustaining life. They marvel at objects. "Screwdrivers and spanners and scissors and pencils are drifting here and there about their heads and shoulders, a pair of tweezers breaks loose and sails towards the air vents."

The inner lives of the characters are less important than what they see. Their view of Earth is so novel, and spectacular, that the routine of the sunrise, the glimpse of the Antarctic, and the great blue of the Pacific Ocean dwarfs the need for reflection. Over and over, they seem to say, simply, look at this.

One analogue for the novel is not liter-

ary, but cinematic. It has the tenor of Terrence Malick's late work, *The Tree of Life* and *To the Wonder*, where a collage of imagery scuppers any need for plot. On encountering an image, say, of "star-scudded clouds", another image arrives of "clouds rippling in tides".

There are many, many images of clouds. The way they shift, blur, break. The way they obscure a full view of the Earth. Harvey appears drawn to them as clear markers of the climate. "It's not so much that the Earth is one thing and the weather another, but that they're the same."

Just as in Harvey's earlier novels, she is interested in particular modes of attention. How do we see the natural world? What is the cost of our view? Whether we choose to nurture the Earth or let it fail, we must know it bears witness to our choice.

Orbital is not only a timely meditation but an essential one. Her best novel to date.